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Logomarks:

Hacking the Company Code

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In popular parlance, the term ‘hacking’ has assumed wholly criminal connotations, referring to the activities of so-called password or network hackers. The word has its origins, however, in the benign, albeit obsessive computer programming going on in the late-60s at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In fact, the primary definition of ‘hacker’ in *The New Hacker’s Dictionary* is someone engaged in “programming enthusiastically”; the entry even expands the term to include “an expert or enthusiast of any kind.”

It’s in this spirit that we use the term in reference to logomarks. Creating a strong logomark is a lot like hacking code. It requires nearly infinite patience, a dedication to the long view and a meticulous attention to detail. What’s more, the end result is the deceptively simple precipitate of a series of little decisions. Deceptively simple is the key phrase here.

Logomarks are the Swiss Army knives of any design program, serving a variety of functions, both practical and symbolic. The main function of logomarks is identification. They are the stylized traces or imprints left behind by companies—traces that, if expertly rendered, are chock-full of meaning. As cataloged by Pers Mollerup in *The Marks of Excellence* (1999), there are at least ten ways in which strong logomarks provide identification. Chief among the ways logomarks uniquely identify a company or product is description (some logomarks contain explicit information about the company or product); association (evinced in marks that communicate something relevant about the company or product by analogy); and pure graphic excellence (where the

logo is read as circumstantial evidence of the quality of the company or product it represents).

Strong logomarks are a lot like good books in that they communicate effectively on a variety of levels, from the superficial to the sublime. Just as *The Great Gatsby* (1922) can be read and appreciated simply as a tragic love story, or in a deeper way, as a proto-existentialist tale of the ‘Lost Generation,’ strong logomarks have multiple layers of meaning. Regardless of form, Mollerup argues that logomarks should communicate three essential messages: 1) what the company or product is; 2) what the company or product is like; and 3) something about the relevant target customers, ideally, what they want.

Lest you consider this argument mere academic drivel, when Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive changed its name to Factiva in the fall of 1999, the company issued a press release that shows the new logomark was designed explicitly to accomplish these three objectives. (In this and many other cases, because the logomark consists of a stylized version of the company

name, any discussion of the former involves the latter.) First, the release spells out how the new name captures what the global news and information services company does, stating: "Factiva delivers the facts." Second, the company's president and CEO Tim Andrews is quoted as saying, "The new name will be synonymous with fast, accurate and indispensable business information." Check off message number two.

Lastly, according to the release, the logomark "focuses on the semiotics of the letter 'i.' The circle of the 'i' reflects all possibilities, and the downstroke represents fact." The treatment of the letter 'i' signifies the "depth and breadth of information" customers in focus groups said they valued, plus "the facts relevant to their decision making." However subtle, this design element is intended to assure customers that Factiva can meet their needs. It's an uncommonly nuanced touch. Typically, logomarks intended to bear close scrutiny come across as grossly symbolic as Gatsby's eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg.

Hacking logomarks, that is, deconstructing them for re-engineering purposes, can provide valuable insights into what works. Doing this in a formal way—breaking them down into their constituent elements and explaining the meaning behind each one—typically draws on semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. The late semiotician and pragmatic philosopher, Charles Morris (1901-1979), divided semiotics into three branches: syntactic (structure of image), semantic (meaning of image) and pragmatic (effect of image). Eschewing much of the related academic jargon, this article will show how these three branches of semiotics apply to logomarks and, along the way, point out some critical implications for design. For consistency of analysis, we'll focus on the diametrically-opposed logomarks for IBM and Apple Computer.

As noted by Dominique Bouchet in her trenchant analysis of these logomarks, syntactically-speaking, they have radically different structures and associated connotations. Following Morris' definition, the term 'syntactic' refers to the structure or plastic dimension of logomarks as defined by line, color, directionality and graphic simplicity or complexity. The striped IBM logomark, created by Paul Rand in 1960, consists of a rigid structure, namely, stacked horizontal lines that spell out the company name. These lines give the logomark a distinctly linear orientation, inviting the eye to scan it quickly. The image is two-dimensional, a form that's associated with iconic representation. Because the logomark is a stylized version of the company name, however, there's no suggestion that the image represents some Platonic form or idealized representation of an everyday object. The logo-

mark is overwhelmingly simple, reinforcing the overwhelmingly rational, engineering approach Big Blue has adopted towards the market.

In stark contrast, the Apple Computer logomark is a wholly organic image, separate and apart from the company name. The image is infused with vibrant colors that comprise a kind of computer-generated rainbow. Given the angle of the colored bars and the 'bite' on the upper-right portion of the image, the orientation of the lines appears to be up and towards the right. In the Western world at least, this directionality suggests forward motion, progress, unnamed possibilities. Unlike the IBM logomark, the two-dimensionality of the Apple logomark is intended to be iconic, to represent a larger idea.

That's where the unique semantic meanings of these logomarks come into play. These meanings arise at the confluence of design and culture. As Morris put it: "While each of us may see the same general image, we each have our own understanding of the image and thus our own meaning. Catfish does not mean the same to each of us." In other words, logomarks are sensitive to context. Their meaning is largely determined by convention—the prevailing interpretation of what would otherwise be purely arbitrary symbols—combined with impressions culled from actual brand experiences.

The IBM logomark consists of simple lines and colors—blue and white stripes—applied only to the company name. What does this design suggest about the brand's values? Its personality and target customers? The simplicity of the logomark indicates a pervasive utilitarianism, a company that values logic and rational processes. A logomark separate from the acronym, after all, would violate Occam's Razor, the engineering principle that demands products consist only of their essential parts. There's also a strong reliability message communicated by the logomark. The simplicity of its constituent elements, combined with its compactness, makes for a reassuring solidity. A near solid rectangle, the logomark closely resembles a brick, or, from a semantic perspective, a sturdy foundation. The logomark implies its customers are similarly devoted to logic and will make their purchase decisions based on a systematic evaluation of the alternatives—something our research among C-level executives and various levels of IT personnel consistently confirms.

While the IBM logomark is about rationality, the Apple logomark is about intuition. The 'apple with a bite' image suggests a number of things: nature (Steve Jobs developed the logo, in part, because he considers the apple the most perfect fruit); intuition (the association between the apple and the fall of man in the Old Testament); learning (the association between the apple and teaching); and the notion that computing can be a



'natural' part of everyday life, among others. The 'rainbow of color' within the apple bolsters these connotations, suggesting promise, hope and even diversity of opinion. If the IBM logomark suggests its customers put a premium on rationality, then the Apple logomark suggests its customers are mainly interested in creativity. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the Apple I debuted at the Homebrew Computer Club in

1) Compelling. This attribute has two main facets: visibility and the ability to generate interest. First and foremost, a logomark should be visible—recognizable across media and in the pertinent environments; and second, it should get and hold the attention of target customers. The first quality is more a matter of graphic excellence than anything else, while the latter also requires a high degree of relevance or salience.

2) Unique. A logomark should distinguish the signified brand from its competitors. At the most basic level, after all, a logomark amounts to an announcement of a brand's presence. This cry of 'I'm here!' should be as clear as possible.

Among the many sins committed during the late dotcom era was the abuse of upstanding geometric shapes like circles and arcs. Logomarks incorporating arcs seemed to proliferate faster than Tribbles, severely reducing their attention-getting power. Worse, the shape was largely applied with little thought to its semantic meaning or pragmatic effect. Arcs tend to suggest momentum, openness and/or stability (like an object in a fixed orbit).

Logomarks for companies as diverse as Concord, E.piphany, bluestreak,

MarketFirst, Digex and Teligent feature (or featured, in the case of shuttered ventures) arcs without any natural or organic relationship to the brand. During this period, arcs assumed the same status as drop shadows—the first resort of lazy designers. Creating a unique logomark means throwing off the tyranny of trends.

3) Simple. Simplicity here refers to structure, not meaning. Strong logomarks are simple in line, color and typography. The intent is to facilitate logomark recognition in virtually any environment, including black and white media. The ideal is a logomark simple enough for target customers to draw absent-mindedly while on the phone. How many times have you found yourself doodling the AT&T's 'digital globe' logomark?

Simple logomarks tend to be perceived as both contemporary and timeless, instilling confidence in target customers. Many enduring logomarks have been simplified over time to great effect. The original Bell System logomark, for instance, featured a detailed bell inside a double-ringed circle. (The bell referred to Alexander Graham Bell rather than to the bell that was part of his original invention.) The modern logomark for the system,

Palo Alto using the MOStek 6502 chip instead of the more popular Intel 8080. In short, it was a kit for the hacker community rather than for industry.

The pragmatic effects of these two logomarks are, in turn, dramatically different. Based on our research, the IBM logomark comes across as monolithic, conjuring up images of stability and empire. Target customers generally trust Big Blue to do things right, but at the same time, are somewhat unsettled by its market dominance. Cue Apple, the perennial underdog. The Apple logomark is now often used without the brand name or its original coloring. Particularly in its current silhouette form, the logomark is presented as a secret code for the sole pleasure of the initiated. Target customers must recognize the logomark without much context; this implies that those who do recognize it are de facto part of some special elite.

On all three levels of semiotic analysis described by Morris—syntactic, semantic and pragmatic—the IBM and Apple logomarks represent two opposite points on the spectrum. Both logomarks have proven successful, however, because they share some essential attributes. In general, strong logomarks are...

IBM and Apple Logomarks		At-a-Glance	
Dimension of Analysis			
<i>Syntactic</i>	Line	Horizontal	Curved
	Color	Simple (white & blue)	Complex ('rainbow' effect)
	Directionality	Closed (left to right)	Open (up & to the right)
<i>Graphic simplicity/complexity</i>		Simple (rigid)	Complex (organic)
	<i>Semantic</i>	Values	Rationality
	Personality	Reliable, stable	Creative, innovative
	Customers' needs	Cognitive	Affective or emotional
<i>Pragmatic</i>		Feelings of safety, confidence	Feelings of empowerment

designed in 1969 by Saul Bass, presents a considerably sleeker, more stylized and contemporary image. In this way, logomarks have followed the compression of language in the digital age, which, for the purposes of email, instant messaging and mobile text communications, comes close to semaphore.

4) Suggestive of positive brand attributes or associations. Strong logomarks suggest desired brand attributes or associations without being boring, cliché or trivial. The Fujitsu logomark presents a positive idea—

It's this expressive side of the logomark that makes it a call for participation rather than just a ploy for attention.

6) Consistent with customers' experiences with the brand. Strong logomarks conjure up meanings that are authentic and credible. The brand identity should be aligned with brand delivery—what the brand offers and how the brand delivers it. The meaning of a logomark is bounded and eventually superseded by customers' actual experiences with the brand. A logomark that connotes high-quality service will elicit derision if the brand

Strong logomarks encourage an emotional bond by addressing the character of the brand's target customers.

'infinite possibility'—in a stylish, contemporary way. The infinity symbol above the 'i' is angled to better suggest the dot and, at the same time, forward motion. This facet of the logomark communicates what the company is like. Strong logomarks ensure target customers come away with a good impression.

5) Rich in meaning. Strong logomarks address both functional and emotional needs. In terms of functionality, the logomark should indicate the nature of the business, if only the product class. It should also give rise to a variety of motivating ideas and emotions. If, as some suggest, branding is about creating a never-ending story, then the logomark should reflect the emotions at the heart of the narrative.

Consider the EarthLink logomark—a globe circumscribed by a comet or fireball. (The orbiting object could even be construed as an elongated computer mouse.) The logomark suggests the firm's global reach, the speed of its Web access services and, given the upward trajectory of the comet or fireball image, a sense of momentum and forward-thinking. What's more, the logomark is arrayed against a field of orange, a color not typically associated with high-tech, such as the common red, blue and gray. This color reinforces what the firm is about: confidence, vitality and success. Orange is a power color and, as used here, implies that EarthLink empowers its customers.

Strong logomarks encourage an emotional bond by addressing the character of the brand's target customers.

behind it is popularly known for poor customer service. That's why changing a logomark doesn't suddenly imbue the brand with new meanings. The weight of history can't be sloughed off so easily.

The most powerful logomarks are those that become archetypes—the totality of certain collective aspirations. Few logomarks for high-tech firms fall into this category because the sector didn't come into its own until relatively recently; however, the logomarks for AT&T, IBM and Apple are definite candidates. These logomarks have taken on a universality that allows them to serve as reference points for our own feelings and behavior. Like myths retold, these logomarks have remained salient and contemporary. They embody a continuous present, suggesting new and different possibilities without losing their core meanings.



MICROREPORTS

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David W. Edwards
Founder and CEO

Michael Lehman
President

115 SW Ash Street, Ste. 610 Portland OR 97204
tel. 971 / 404.0275 fax. 971 / 404.0274

www.zanthus.com